





Transgender liberation?

A movement whose time has passed

David Faes

**TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST LESLIE FEINBERG** pro-claimed in a 1992 political pamphlet that the time for transgender liberation had come. Over twenty years later, popular media described the increasing visibility of transgender lifestyles as a “trans tipping point” or “trans moment.” However, upon further inspection, one discovers luminaries of the Enlightenment already expressed whatever “new” ideas have come to the fore, and better the first time around. While the number of writings grows beyond count, the new insights fall below the potential characterized by the moment of their conception.

Sexual emancipation, conceived of in the Enlightenment era, challenged the natural basis of gender and the nature of sexual identity fixed to procreation within traditional family structures. Marx saw that this challenge to the ideas of man and woman indicated “how far man’s natural behavior has become human, and how far his human essence has become a natural essence for him, how far his human nature has become nature for him.” In this way, sexual emancipation was understood within the context of the development of man’s transformation of nature, and thereby of himself—of human nature—toward the end of human freedom: “the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick.”

It was this development and elaboration of all human powers as such, of human freedom, which was understood to be the task of world history by those who struggled for socialism over a century ago. It was by their hand that the industrial revolution was developed, informing the technical and scientific concepts we use to understand sex and gender, pointing toward their potential overcoming. The political struggles of socialist sexual reformers such as Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the Institute for Sexual Research, advocated the legalization of sodomy, prostitution and cross-dressing, coined the terms “homosexual,” “transvestite,” and “transsexual” in their contemporary usage, and professionalized sex-reassignment surgery, stoked the flames of the ongoing process of the industrial revolution. Their view that human freedom could be achieved by the simultaneous abolition and fulfilment of the need for production seems almost cavalier on the other side of the 20th century, faced with the failure of the emancipatory project of the world socialist revolution. Indeed, the political efforts of the contemporary movement for transgender liberation appear meagre by comparison and what’s more threaten to liquidate the previous insights.

Today, real weakness in the pursuit of freedom is glossed over with the luster of identity. Although we inherit the technological developments bequeathed by the 19th-century socialist sexual reformers, today’s misunderstanding that the desire to use these technologies is the effect of a congenital pathology or an authentic way of being curtails the freedom of the individual to elaborate his own acquired wants and needs. At the same time, the trans community and its advocates use whatever political strength they do have to overcompensate for their lack of principle. “Left” leaders of the LGBTQ movement, either direct employees or indirect advocates of the public-services bureaucracy, hold their beneficiaries politically hostage to the existing dynamics of the Democratic Party. Leftist critics tend to focus narrowly on the influence that private and philanthropic funders have over non-profit LGBTQ and HIV/AIDS institutions. Budget constraints on these institutions marginalize low-income and transgender beneficiaries resulting in competition within the LGBTQ community over social services and medical resources. It is true that access to medical and social resources is limited to those who can afford them and that even after transitioning, access to employment and the rights that come with it, is restricted due to discrimination. However, the present Left’s line of criticism frames the obstacle to sexual emancipation as a betrayal or “co-optation” of the movement by the Democratic Party and whatever corporate influences gravitate around it. In this way, trans advocates galvanize support for community institutions which rely on the support of the Democratic Party to offer limited social provisions such as housing and medical services to the general LGBTQ community. This elides the deeper problem of the pursuit of freedom in history. Instead the contemporary Left’s criticisms reproduce the screen-image of patronage to the LGBTQ community: on one side a more smoothly managed and served LGBTQ constituency is envisaged, and on the other a subcultural, aesthetic self-curation thematizes and prematurely sublimates the resentment that one must rely on these state-managed bureaucracies in the first place. It is as though every contemporary discussion of trans freedom is expected to fulfil certain requirements: first and foremost, the queer or trans identity. The hard-Left’s calls to “queer” the existing Left to build a broad movement to pressure the Democratic Party coalesce with the academic navel gazing inspired by Judith Butler. Both preoccupations provide students with an anesthetic in that they avoid what was once historically possible and obscure their own lowered horizons. Since the principles of sexual emancipation have suffered such heavy losses and have reappeared today in this new form of the “trans identity,” we must ask what is still left to it. While a full consideration of this would require a more thorough historical study, what is of concern here is simply that students should become aware of what is absent from today’s efforts to bring about sexual emancipation, particularly for transgender people.

A history of freedom, not oppression

The effort to consider what is absent in today’s movement for transgender liberation in relation to the history of the Left must be carefully distinguished from a nearly universally accepted understanding of what is called “transgender history”: namely, the idea that trans people have always existed since the beginning of humanity and will always exist. This view, however, was first proffered by sexual reformers working within the homosexual-emancipation movement in order to argue for the natural basis of legal rights. The socialist sexual reformer, Magnus Hirschfeld, for instance, claimed that sexual minorities deserved rights on the basis that their condition was biological, in part evidenced by the fact that people had lived this way since the beginning of human history. This argument was used to justify sexual reforms such as the Scientific Humanitarian Committee’s famous, and unsuccessful, attempt to repeal Paragraph 175, the law which penalized sodomy in the Prussian Empire, as well as the distribution of identity documents for transvestites by the Berlin municipal government in 1908.



Magnus Hirschfeld at the Institute for Sexual Science in the 1920s.

This natural explanation has prevailed, however uncritically, and can be recognized in Leslie Feinberg’s 1992 pamphlet, “Trans Liberation: a movement whose time has come,” wherein she claimed that transgenderism “predates oppression.” For Feinberg, transgenderism, due to its superficial resemblance to certain castes in matriarchal communalist societies of the paleolithic era, is venerated as outside of, and even a priori against capitalism. However, these pre-Modern cross-gendered castes were specified as roles within closed, spiritual cosmologies and traditional family structures. Let us recall that in Okinawa, the process of winagu nati, was used by male shamans to “become female,” or that in South Asia the Hijra undergo a similar process in order to participate in the rituals of their community. We could also recall the muxes, a “third sex,” still found in Oaxaca today, who live with their mothers for their entire lives in order to perform those productive tasks which seem best suited to them, namely domestic labor. Or we can consider the historic role of the Two-Spirit genders in the Pacific Northwest, whereby women could become women-men as hunters, and men could become men-women by performing domestic labor. Each of these examples illustrates a gendered caste which is determined by on a role within the family or spiritual community. What is recognized as a similarity between the ancient and modern world betrays a sense of our own historical moment, the simultaneous movement beyond the family and its latent persistence. What Marx wrote of the bourgeois myths of the ancient world describes this well: “This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier. On the other side, it really is loftier in all matters where closed shapes forms and given limits are sought for. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or, where it appears satisfied with itself, it is vulgar.” Hirschfeld, by contrast with contemporary activists such as Feinberg, was consciously taking up a project he had inherited from the bourgeois revolutions. The rise of emancipated free labor challenged the natural basis of gender and the nature of sexual identity fixed to procreation within traditional family structures, giving rise to new social forms of sexuality and sexual identity. Emancipated laborers were not only free to determine what sorts of work they would take up, but also what sorts of lives they would lead. Laboring individuals could work for a period of time so as to elaborate their own creative capacities, needs, and interests in their free time through exchange. What is of concern to our argument is the development of the laborer’s own personal sexual, erotic, emotional, and familial desires and needs. We can recall the emergence of the “molly houses,” effeminate male brothels, in the 18th century, Dr. James Barry a male surgeon in the British army who was discovered only after his death to be a biological female, the life of Chevalier d’Eon in the 18th century who lived his first 49 years as a man and her last 33 years as a woman, among many other examples. Whereas the pre-modern castes were intended to give a closed form to life in order to reproduce a culture as it existed, the freedom of sexuality in modern society is open-ended. Modern individuals are tasked with making meaning of their own lives in relationship to the development of freedom in society, i.e. in terms of history.

Sexual emancipation and Social Democracy

The cultural developments within society that facilitated sexual emancipation concomitantly gave rise to political transformations. Most significantly, in 1791, the French National assembly repealed punishments for sodomy and cross-dressing. This new legal system was subsequently spread across Europe in the form of the Napoleonic Code. The German states of Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden, Hanover, and Brunswick had all taken up their own versions of this code, abolishing the penalization of same-sex sexual behaviors and cross-dressing, while the less liberal states such as Saxony and Prussia had retained the feudal laws.

It was against this background that socialists took up the political demand for sexual emancipation as part and parcel of the social question in the 1848 revolutions. Just as most socialists agreed on the goal of abolishing the state, they also agreed on the goal of abolishing the traditional family and the division between the sexes. The failure of the democratic revolutions of 1848, and Bismarck’s subsequent efforts to establish Prussian hegemony culminating in the foundation of the German Reich gave way to the reintroduction of the Prussian sodomy law for many states in Germany in the form of Paragraph 175, and the laws criminalizing cross-dressing as a public nuisance in the form of Paragraphs 360/11 and 183. Consequently, people who were formerly free came to recognize a significant loss in their freedom: an aspect of their life suddenly became a crime. In response to these circumstances, intellectuals such as Karl Ulrichs had developed the term “Urning,” a reference to Plato’s Aphrodite Urania, to describe a biological condition in which a person with a feminine brain lives within a masculine body and to write publicly in defense of those who were punished for it. Ulrichs’s work inspired literary personalities such as Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, and James Addington Symonds to further popularize the term. This urged sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Carl Westphal to research sexual inversion and the contrary sexual instinct, which simultaneously facilitated their readers using these terms to identify themselves and their own obstacles. In order to maintain their jobs and livelihoods, they used these newly developed terms as focal points around which to form civil-society organizations to coordinate the development of social clubs, litigation, and minor municipal reforms only insofar as existing municipal procedures were obstacles to their livelihoods and organizing. Because liberals had abandoned the desiderata of sexual emancipation and the separation of the state from private life due to pressures from the right, only socialists such as Hirschfeld remained.

Hirschfeld founded civic institutions to facilitate the further development of the sexual-emancipation movement and to struggle for social reforms. These institutions included the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in 1896, the Institute for Sexual Research in 1919, and the World League for Sexual Reform in 1928. Through his work in these institutions, Hirschfeld would come to define the terms “homosexual,” “transvestite,” and “transsexual” and distinguish them from one another in the way we understand them today. However, rather than understanding these terms as innate identities, Hirschfeld understood them in relation to the types of political obstacles faced by his patients.

Paragraph 175 corresponded to the definition of “homosexual” as one who finds a love-object of the same sex because this law criminalized same-sex sexual activities. Paragraphs 360/11 and 183 corresponded to the definitions of “transvestite” and “transsexual” as someone who felt and behaved as the opposite sex because these laws penalized public cross-dressing. The lack of state-regulated medical resources corresponded to the further specification of the term “transsexual,” which was used to describe those who would use unregulated medical procedures and surgeries on themselves in order to appear as the opposite sex.

Hirschfeld’s institutions worked to clear these political obstacles. The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee put forward political petitions to the Reichstag in 1898, 1922, and 1925 to repeal Paragraph 175. When Hirschfeld’s Scientific-Humanitarian Committee first put forward their 1898 petition to repeal Paragraph 175, leading orthodox Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and August Bebel supported it. Kautsky argued in his series of articles critiquing state socialism, that abolishing the state would facilitate the development of a free society with new forms of communal life and kinship. It was this understanding of sexual emancipation in relation to the need to conquer state power to bring about a social revolution that led Kautsky to support the petition. Similarly, August Bebel, co-founder of the SPD, gave a speech in the Reichstag in favor of repealing the penalization of sodomy, arguing primarily against the state’s intervention into private life. Orthodox Marxists such as Kautsky and Bebel could take up this emerging discontent on the basis that it expressed the problem of the state rising over society, pointing to the need for a political revolution in order to fulfil and overcome the possibilities for freedom that arose in the bourgeois revolutions.

Sexual reforms and the political revolution

While the effort to repeal Paragraph 175 was highly politically articulated, the efforts to mitigate or repeal Paragraphs 360/11 and 183 were only pursued insofar as they presented an obstacle at the local level. Hirschfeld and his colleagues, such as psychoanalyst Karl Abraham, attempted to change the prosecution of Paragraphs 360/11 and 183 at the municipal, rather than national, level. By 1908 Hirschfeld and Abraham had convinced the Berlin municipal government and its police to issue their transvestite patients certificates and passports if they could show they had approved medical documentation. These “transvestite certificates” showed that the police knew of the bearer’s behavior and so was not guilty of creating a nuisance.

These and other developments of the socialist movement raised questions about the relationship between the socialist struggle for reforms and the task of seizing state power in a political revolution. Lenin, for instance, in his 1902 pamphlet What is to Be Done? agreed with the orthodox Marxists such as Kautsky that Social Democracy must saturate the working class with the consciousness of its position and task. Lenin saw that the party could mediate the wider efforts of the socialist movement allowing the movement to reflect on its own activity in relation to its end goal. Thus, political education would comprise “illuminating all aspects of life, and [be] conducted among the broadest possible strata of the masses” to the extent that capitalism “manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity – vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc., etc.”

Similarly, in her 1900 pamphlet Reform or Revolution, Luxemburg argued that the advances in capitalism which resulted from the growth and success of the socialist movement, such as the development of credit, the employer’s associations, communication services, and the political strength of the trade unions, aggravated rather than attenuated the conflict of capitalism, creating the potential for new crises and deepening the need for revolution. Thus, she argued that the party must mediate between the practical accomplishments of the movement and its consciousness of the necessity, possibility, and desirability of the end goal. In Lenin’s and Luxemburg’s terms, the party facilitated the development of this “socialist” or “class” consciousness.

The ostensible advances of socialist sexual reformers can be understood in the same way: as an aggravation of the crisis of society in capitalism, posing and deepening the necessity, possibility, and desirability of the revolution. The supposed successes of the sexual reformers posed the necessity for a critical reflection on the relationship between the movement for sexual reforms within the broader socialist movement and the end goal of socialism. The mass socialist parties of the Second International were a necessary precondition for even considering this question practically, because the International actualized the possibility of taking state power to the end of a world socialist revolution in the first place.

To the extent that the party was regarded as the focal point of coordinating the efforts for sexual reforms, reformers such as Hirschfeld and orthodox Marxists such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky, and Bebel were in

practical agreement. It was only after the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the subsequent political success of the SPD in the Reichstag that the difference between the orthodox and the radical Marxists manifested itself.

The emergence of workers’ councils as a bourgeois democratic form with de facto power in the 1905 revolution posed the practical possibility of party-educated workers taking state power to lead the revolution. The party leadership’s support for parliamentary forms, which were opposed to proletarian socialist leadership of the revolution, anticipated the SPD’s support of the provisional government in the October Revolution of 1917 and the failed German Revolution of 1918.

As the largest party in the Reichstag, the SPD itself had begun to lead society, and consequently took on the same crisis of society. In the context of socialist sexual reforms this meant that the advances of the party’s efforts to ameliorate the conditions of “sexual variants” also simultaneously deepened the problem of the capitalist state. In November of 1918 Hirschfeld wrote that, with the establishment of the provisional government by Scheidemann and Ebert, all those whom the sexual emancipation movement had fought for would be finally liberated from their oppression. With the removal of the Prussian state, and the relaxing of obscenity laws in 1919, Hirschfeld could broaden his work under the new state management of the SPD by developing his Institute for Sexual Research and the World League for Sexual Reform.

In 1919, after Ebert and Scheidemann had put down the Spartacist Uprising, the state of the Weimar Republic required the police to delegate some of their authority to new positions within the state bureaucracy: social workers. Hirschfeld relied on this expansion of the state bureaucracy and its social workers to process legal name changes for his patients. The same year, Hirschfeld founded the Institute for Sexual Research, in order to provide regulated medical services to his patients. Prior to this his patients would perform a variety of surgical procedures on themselves, including hormone replacement, self-castration, facial-hair epilation, paraffin injections, breast removal, and uterus removal. By 1921 the Institute had attempted its first male-to-female surgery. In 1922, the Berlin municipal government changed their enforcement of the penal paragraphs 360/11 and 183, reiterating that wearing clothes of the opposite sex was not illegal, unless it involved prostitution. Just as Scheidemann and Ebert rendered the workers’ councils impotent by incorporating them into the state through the Workmen’s Councils Legislation in order to preserve the Reich state under new management, Hirschfeld relegated the sexual and gender identities of sexual variants to the realm of state management.

By contrast, in the October Revolution, when the soviets conquered power from the provisional government, they abrogated the tsarist legal codes, thereby abolishing the penalization of sodomy and cross-dressing. This opened up the potential for various lifestyles to develop in private, just as they had in the 17th and 18th centuries, without the guardianship of the state. Because there were no official state positions concerning issues of homosexuality, transvestitism, or transsexualism, medical and juridical experts would weigh in with their professional opinions if and when political problems concerning sexuality and gender emerged at the level of the soviets. Medical doctors and psychologists such as N.F. Orlov and P.B. Gannushkin, were influenced by Hirschfeld’s efforts, insisting that the soviets should not disregard requests for sex change as a decadent “German Problem.” Indeed, the medical entry on homosexuality in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, written by the psychologist Mark Sereiskii, was inspired by Hirschfeld’s research. Sereiskii assumed Hirschfeld’s belief that sexual variation was a natural condition which should not be penalized.

Throughout the 1920s in the European regions and urban centers of Russia it had become regular, though tenuous, for individuals to request and for soviets to permit an operative and lawful sex change. In Moscow’s city health department, some medical practitioners would carry out the surgery and several medical cases show that doctors documented their patients with both a male and a female name. Presumably, these patients and their doctors took advantage of a legal loophole which allowed patients with hermaphroditism to undergo surgery. Some of these individuals even gained legal family rights: when a female-to-male transsexual, Evgenii Fedorovich, married a female postal worker in 1922, a soviet court decreed that the marriage was legal. However, due to the infrequency of these cases, the 1929 Expert Medical Council postponed clarifying “the right (pravo) of transvestites to enter into marriage with persons of the same sex and [...] the right [of doctors] to produce operations to change the sex of transvestites legality for another time.”

Despite the advancements in sexual freedom achieved by the October Revolution, the resources of the soviet state did not match the goals of the Communist Party, not least of all with respect to issues of sexuality and the family. The failure of the revolution to become international and the turmoil of the Russian Civil War engendered ideological disorientation resulting in the subsequent period of Stalinization. For Trotsky, the suppression of the youth’s questions about the compromise of the party’s stated goals, as a measure to prevent splits and factions, naturalized the unfavorable conditions of the Civil War and curtailed the party’s ability to anticipate new possibilities and tasks. Trotsky argued that the convolution of the party and the state bureaucracy motivated the repression of questions with regard to the party’s utopian goals. This conflation led to the reconstitution of traditional moral and family laws which would more exploitatively enforce the reproduction of the working class including the reinstatement of the law criminalizing homosexual behavior. This abandoned the party’s role of anticipating the tasks towards the proletariat’s self-abolition. The reversals of sexual liberation during this period of reaction, such as the banning of sex-reassignment surgeries and the re-criminalization of homosexuality, could be understood as part of the problem of the failure of the Socialist International and its leading parties, the SPD and the RSDLP/Communist Party, to realize their end goal.

The trans identity and counterrevolution

Just as the theory of vulgar Marxists throughout the crisis of Marxism naturalized the relationship of the movement and the party to the state, resulting in ideological obstacles to the task of advancing the socialist revolution, the theory of the socialist sexual reformers naturalized the relationship of sexuality to the state, resulting in ideological obstacles to critical reflection on the failure of the revolution. Both Hirschfeld and Sereiskii prioritized the biological as opposed to the social explanation of sexuality. Not only did this obscure the way in which sexual variance is a manifestation of



Those Twenties, cont. from page 2

1930s that viewed all of these enterprises—united front, popular front, NLWM, entering the Labour Party—as a deformation of communism, and they were opposed to it. There was always a group of recalcitrant members who saw themselves as militant communists and they didn’t want to muddy their hands in this bourgeois stuff. In that sense, the third period and popular front were flip sides of the same coin. Ultimately it’s the same method of adaptation flipping over into frenzied sectarianism. It’s the same process.

**EC:** In the imagination of the Left in the present—in Britain and in the United States—the 1930s is seen as the most radical period and the history is taken up from that point. When discussing the historiography of the NLWM in the 1920s, you argue that the 1930s has really obscured the 1920s and given the people who wrote the history of the 1920s a skewed view of things. Why is that?

**LP:** I’m familiar with some of the historiography of American communism and I believe similar tensions have appeared, but I am much more well-versed in the historiography of the British party. The CPGB’s history was initially written by the CPGB itself from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Most of the products were pretty terrible, but one thing they did establish was this idea that the real foundational period of British communism was the 1930s. The people who produced and oversaw this were fairly tired, old reformists—Stalinists. They produced a mythology of the popular front in the 1930s, saying that this is when British communism came alive, got rid of all its terrible ideas about revolutionary communism and militancy, and when it really began to establish itself as a native, rooted party that embraced all the democratic and progressive ideals of the British people. The CPGB’s own mythology about this period represents a very slanted view. I am guessing that you and I would have a slightly different interpretation of communists carrying around banners in 1937 or 1938 saying, “Only the Communist Party stands for the idea of a Merrie England.” This is a ludicrous kind of politics. They mythologized this period and the Spanish Civil War, which were disastrous periods of Stalinism. This was the era of the show trials, remember. Noreen Branson, an official CPGB historian, actually said this was the period in which the communist movement came out into the sunlight. But this is the era when people were being shot in the back of their head and Stalinist agents were running rampant in Spain killing revolutionaries. It is a bizarre interpretation. But what is interesting is that that mythology imposed itself on the academic historiography that came afterwards. Kevin Morgan, Britain’s leading historian on the Communist Party, a good historian, whose works I have enjoyed and found quite stimulating, writes about the Communist Party in the 1930s in the same mythologizing terms it would write about itself in. Morgan will talk about the CPGB going into the Labour Party in the 1930s, which was a clandestine operation dictated by the Comintern, as more of a gentle coming together of progressive-minded souls working together. And in the middle of all this mythology the 1920s becomes lost. The reason it becomes lost is because it is different politics. All of the new CPGB historians, the academic historians, have no

means by which to qualitatively assess different periods of Communist Party history. They look at the CPGB in the 1920s as the same organization as in the 1930s and the 1940s. But it was not the same; it deteriorated. And the 1920s was an embarrassment to the CPGB. It is an embarrassment to have an organization that talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, soviets, and the revolutionizing of the Labour Party. That was an embarrassment to the CPGB in 1967, in which revolution was a swear word.

**EC:** British Trotskyists in the 1970s and 1980s also wrote about this period. In Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein’s The Labour Party: a Marxist History, the NLWM is addressed—briefly—as an obstacle to revolutionary politics, as a failure. Interestingly, they specifically attacked the NLWM programme, arguing that the Marxist Left needs to differentiate itself by taking up the day-to-day struggle and immediate demands, and having radical movements outside of the trade union bureaucracy. Although they obviously come from a different tradition to the CPGB historians, it seems that the popular front of the 1930s also clouds their approach to the 1920s.

**LP:** I am not as up on the SWP’s ideology as I should be, but, formally at least, they would oppose the popular front. However, the methodology on which they conceive revolutionary struggle is exactly the same as the deformations we have been talking about. With the SWP I would say there is something more fundamental. They have this really strange addiction to action. For Cliff and Gluckstein—I can’t remember if it’s the history of the Labour Party or the book on the general strike, which also has a section on the NLWM—one of the high points of the 1920s was the Rates Rebellion in Poplar led by George Lansbury. It is action. It doesn’t matter that it was led by Lansbury, who ended up supporting the expulsion of the communists from the Labour Party. I think with them it’s something a bit more atavistic. They are almost like Georges Sorel—completely addicted to this conception that any old action always trumps political struggle because that is the way that they see revolution occurring. They have that kind of economistic conception that it is only in the day-to-day struggles. We see that now. The SWP can’t relate to the Labour Party. I don’t think any revolutionary group can, as an aside. I don’t blame them for that, but they can’t relate to it. If you just go along and say, “We’re gonna have a demo about this”—well, okay, but you don’t advance beyond that. But I also have to say that Cliff and Gluckstein’s work on the NLWM is an appalling use of the data. They take revolutionary, hardcore statements by Dutt; at the point they are quoting from—the mid-1920s—Dutt was suspicious of the NLWM being formed and he was trying to impose the hardest communist stamp on it. Fair enough, they quote this stuff and then they say the NLWM is an example of right-wing reformism. And they don’t actually refer to the NLWM programme by name, which I think is absurd. They just call it “demands.” Because they haven’t got a programme, no one else can have a programme—it’s bizarre. But there was a more honourable Trotskyist tradition of writing about the NLWM, represented by Brian Pearce. I was critical of his essay on the NLWM, but I found it very helpful.

**EC:** We have touched in passing on the Corbyn phenomenon and the way the Left is trying to relate to it today. You said earlier that you began writing the book thinking that the 1920s might say something about the Labour Party and the Left today, but you moved away from that position as you wrote the book, perhaps to the disappointment of those you had initially started discussing this project with. Why did that change happen and what do you think this history can say to the present?

**LP:** The general lesson that I got from this book, which in some ways is a paralyzingly banal lesson, is that I am really unsure about entryist projects. Both shallow entry—where you remain in an organization, use it for certain ends and propagandise, but you don’t necessarily adapt to your surroundings—and deep entry may be incredibly difficult. The CPGB in the 1920s was an organization rooted in the Labour Party. Around it was a group of people who probably would have called themselves communists but weren’t in the CPGB. It had a sympathetic audience in the Labour Party. It was well dug in and its members were well respected in certain localities because they were fighters for the class and they were good revolutionaries. There were obviously charismatic figures whom people would follow. That is quite a benign backdrop compared to what we have now, but that didn’t stop them from being dug out of that situation by the Labour Party, which was set on a very different course and wanted to get rid of communists. In that relatively benign situation, entry into the Labour Party became a very difficult process. Comparing that with what we have now, I think there are no specific lessons because the situation simply does not match. In the 1920s, the CPGB—despite all its faults, ramshackle organization that it was—was a serious organization that composed an advanced, class minority. It was a class movement. Now what do we have? Just a rubble of incoherent, sect-like organizations, the best of which have some of the features of the worst. If either of the two biggest organizations on the far left in Britain at the moment—the Socialist Party in England and Wales, and the SWP—joined the Labour Party, given the state of their politics and their internal organizations, I don’t think they would be any different to what you have in the Labour Party at the moment. If you are brave enough to attend your constituency Labour Party, which I have been known to do sometimes, the people you meet are actually quite familiar. If you’ve been in the revolutionary left, you know these people, because they come across like more stupid and less-educated versions of SWP and Socialist Party members. SWP and SP members are usually better educated and have something about them. But do I actually think that the SWP and the SP are good enough to do a hard, factional organization in the Labour Party? No, because their politics are soft. They have spent years tailing around anti-war movements and certain supposed lefties in the trade unions. They won’t be able to do it. The more I got into this project, the less it spoke to my experiences of relating to the Labour Party. I think it’s right for people to go into things and check things out, but speaking from bitter experience of my own constituency Labour Party, it’s like a madhouse. I have better debates with people about politics at work—more informed debates, more interesting debates, and more openness. It’s toxic because it’s a really weird situation. Jeremy Corbyn is obviously the most left-wing leader the Labour Party

has ever had. That is quite true, but even in the 1930s—despite the split about the national government when MacDonald was kicked out—the Labour Party, and its rank and file, could articulate a vision of socialism and an alternative society. It would have been a social-democratic one, of which I would have many criticisms and that I think would have been a hopeless utopia. There is no alternative vision of socialism in the Labour Party now. You have a loose, disaggregated mess of good causes and well-meaning individuals composed around a really hopeless personality cult around somebody who hasn’t got a personality: Jeremy Corbyn. I would support him against the Labour right. I would be really worried if anybody picked up my pamphlet and said, “This is what we have to do.” It would be good if something like the NLWM existed, but those things can’t come out of thin air.

**EC:** Your book reminded me of Adorno’s essay “Those Twenties,” in which he talks about how people are looking back, mainly in art and culture, from the 1960s and viewing the 1920s as a high point. For Adorno, the potential there was already over by 1924. He writes, “The uncertain relationship between the present day and the ’20s is conditioned by a historical discontinuity”; however, “the impulses must be recovered that in the vaunted ’20s were already threatening to petrify or dissipate.” Does that speak to your project? What would it mean to try to recover those impulses of the 1920s today?

**LP:** That is an interesting question. I wonder what form Adorno would want those kind of things recovered in. Given Adorno’s ruthlessly critical attitude to everything, I would say that I wouldn’t want to recover the 1920s because I think underpinning all of this was a project that simply couldn’t have worked, given the way the Comintern militarised itself, the Soviet Union and the Bolsheviks. As a totality I wouldn’t seek to recover it; however, there were bits and pieces of it that would be good. The interesting thing about the NLWM and its project was that it slightly cut against mthat militarised notion. Given that it was going into a broader organization with a specific programme, there was some kind of conception that we need to make the Labour Party accept that there is a diversity and that communists are members of that diversity. The Communist Party couldn’t accept that internally—it couldn’t accept factions or diversity. I do think there are fragments and nuggets you can pull out, which I guess is what Adorno is getting at. If Adorno was looking at Schoenberg or something like that—it’s a long time since I read it—and looking at what was good about Schoenberg and what was shit, I don’t think he would want to dig that out of one historical context and place it in another. I think that he would try to pull it out like fragments and shards and then interrogate those in their turn. But I do think there are positive lessons—it’s not completely bleak. Culturally, organizationally, and ideologically the CPGB and the Left of the 1920s—I include the Labour left in that, despite all its shit—was a movement that was 20 times ahead of anything that we have today. You can’t transpose it, but in that critical sense, yes, I do think there is something to the notion of a critical rediscovery. **IP**

1 [www.lulu.com/shop/lawrence-parker/communists-and-labour-the-national-left-wing-movement-19251929/paperback/product-23727879.html](http://www.lulu.com/shop/lawrence-parker/communists-and-labour-the-national-left-wing-movement-19251929/paperback/product-23727879.html)

#MeToo and the millennial sex panic . cont. from page 1

responsibility and, not to mention, adding the additional masochistic gratification of self-deprecation. This reconciles millennials to their abdication of the free pursuit of happiness, exhibiting what Wilhelm Reich once called a “fear of freedom.” [9]

The existing, so-called “Left” is itself a subculture that is out of touch with whatever desire for or fear of freedom seems plausible among the masses today. That said, the Left has since 2006 put all their stock in the progressive millennials they helped to solidify as a constituent within the Democratic Party as part of their attempts at political education. The emergence of subcultural groups such as “Gays for Trump” and “Trannies for Trump” [sic] illustrates the bankruptcy of the contemporary Left. Trump appeals to people not as a subculture or particular interest, but rather in the interest of human individuals to freely pursue happiness—for example, he has said at his rallies that the LGBTQ community is an expression of American freedom. At the same time, the common leftist tropes that smack of paternalism about what kinds of sexual, kinship, and erotic activities are appropriate for women and LGBTQ people continue to persist in these Trumpist spheres.

The existing Left’s criticisms of the Democratic Party for its strategy regarding the Kavanaugh hearings amounts to a wish that the labor constituency within the Democratic Party could be more significant, just as the Left’s support amounts to a sop to the radical liberal progressive millennial Democrats. The Democrats have simply used existing sexual taboos as means to opportunistically win back suburban women from their support for Trump—a strategy which has only backfired. The Left in its opportunistic (“critical”) support for the Democrats reaffirms the existing sexual taboos rather than considering what it would mean to emancipate them. In this sense, the “Left” is simply a variant of the right. In such circumstances the task at hand would be to hold up the history of what the Left has been to reconsider what it can yet become, to hold ourselves steady as the sun sets on the millennial generation. **IP**

*Period, and Cohort Effects on Having No Sexual Partners After Age 18’*. Archives of Sexual Behavior 46, no. 2 (1 February 2017): 433–40.

2 For instance, there has been resentment towards the Anti-#Metoo Manifesto, available in English translation at the following link: <https://www.worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/full-translation-of-french-anti-metoo-manifesto-signed-by-catherine-deneuve>

3 Breton, André. *Mad Love*. Translated by Mary Ann. Caws. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, p. 26.

4 Juliet Mitchell, ‘*Women: The Longest Revolution*’, New Left Review, I, no. 40 (1966): 25.

5 Marx, Karl. “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.*” In K. Marx & F. Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 3 (pp. 229–348). London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1959.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘*Sexual Taboos and the Law Today*’, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 71–88.

7 ‘June 10-July 12, 2015 – *Gaming, Jobs and Broadband*’ (Pew Research Center, 9 April 2016), <http://www.pewinternet.org/dataset/september-2014-march-2015-teens/>.

8 Fenichel, Otto. *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 291.

9 Reich, Wilhelm. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975.

Transgender liberation?, cont. from page 3

an individual’s free pursuit of happiness, but moreover this same biological understanding was the basis for the re-criminalization of homosexuality in both Germany and Russia.

This casts the supposed “advancements” of the 20th century, such as the “gender clinics” of Hirschfeld’s student Harry Benjamin, in a different light: it would allow us to understand them as moments in the self-liquidation of the party throughout the 20th century, which permits us to apologize for declining political horizons today. Benjamin used Hirschfeld’s terms to relegate transitional hormones and surgeries to those who had exhibited the correct pathologies. Competition for these resources reinforced fractures within the gay subculture between transvestites, transgender people and transsexuals. Subsequently the term “trans” itself was proffered by Jordy Jones as an umbrella term for all gender variance. But still, the social pressures on trans individuals to “come out” as an “authentic self” that one “always was” has reinforced the ways in which trans people have been integrated into the state-regulated medical industry and the LGBTQ public-services bureaucracy.

The extent to which sexual emancipation remains a salient political demand is the extent to which it has continued to develop as an aspect of bourgeois society, however in crisis. There can be no sexual freedom in an unfree society. Actual sexual emancipation is not realizable on a basis of “generalized want” in response to the crisis of capitalism. This would have to be replaced by the unfettered development of human potential, as Marx formulated nearly 160 years ago. Socialism, should it become a world-historic effort building upon this newly emerging political context, could not offer anything particular to any group or any particular creed; it could only offer the emancipation of all humanity. Without a mass international socialist party, such as the Second International, there is no room for critical reflection or debate actually informing mass political practice and international social action. Without this, it is not possible to critically recognize sexual liberation’s own history in relation to emerging practical tasks and possibilities for social change. The struggle for socialism and sexual emancipation can be understood as epiphenomena of the historical problem of advancing the project of freedom, rather than as interest groups within the state, as they were seen in the past by Hirschfeld and as they are still seen today. The contemporary Left attempts to use them to mobilize constituents as pressure groups to agitate existing civic institutions and the Democratic Party. However, their more powerful effect is the political miseducation of the youth they aim to enlist to such a cause. Not only do today’s ostensible advances run the risk of transforming into their opposite, but even worse, the potential to even consider, let alone make use of, history is constrained. The “Left” today in their “resistance” to the state and gender actually identify with both. The disjecta membra of previous attempts to change the world are used to justify the wrongness of the present one, whereas the point in the past was to master society, as a kind of second nature, and thereby pose the possibility of transforming it. The struggle for socialism and sexual emancipation can be understood

as epiphenomena of the historical problem of advancing the project of freedom, rather than as interest groups within the state, as they were seen in the past by Hirschfeld and as they are still seen today. The contemporary Left attempts to use them to mobilize constituents as pressure groups to agitate existing civic institutions and the Democratic Party. However, their more powerful effect is the political miseducation of the youth they aim to enlist to such a cause. Not only do today’s ostensible advances run the risk of transforming into their opposite, but even worse, the potential to even consider, let alone make use of, history is constrained. The “Left” today in their “resistance” to the state and gender actually identify with both. The disjecta membra of previous attempts to change the world are used to justify the wrongness of the present one, whereas the point in the past was to master society, as a kind of second nature, and thereby pose the possibility of transforming it. **IP**

1 Marx, Karl. “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.*” In K. Marx & F. Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 3 (pp. 229–348). London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1959, p. 269.

2 Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p.488.

3 *ibid.*

4 Kautsky, Karl. “*Der Staatssozialismus.*” *Der Sozialdemokrat*, 1881; Kautsky, Karl. “*Die Abschaffung des Staates.*” *Der Sozialdemokrat*, 1881.

5 Bebel, August. [John Lauritsen, Trans.] “*The Man Who Spoke Out: 80th Anniversary of a Landmark in Gay Rights.*” *Gay News*, 1978, p. 136.

6 Lenin, V. I. *What is to be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*. 1969. New York: International Publishers, p. 40.

7 *Ibid.*, p.172.

8 Healey, Dan. *Homosexual desire in Revolutionary Russia: the regulation of sexual and gender dissent*. 2001. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 170.

9 Trotsky, Leon. *The revolution betrayed: what is the Soviet Union and where is it going?* 2009. New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, p.162-163.

10 *Ibid.*, p.267.

1 Twenge, Jean M. *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever before*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2014; Martinez, Gladys M., and Joyce C. Abma. “*Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing of Teenagers Aged 15–19 in the United States*”. NCHS Data Brief. National Center for Health Statistics, July 2015; Twenge, Jean M., Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katharine Lacefield, and David R. Schurtz. “*Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology among Young Americans, 1938–2007: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the MMPI*”. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 2 (1 March 2010): 145–54; Twenge, Jean M., Ryne A. Sherman, and Brooke E. Wells. “*Sexual Inactivity During Young Adulthood Is More Common Among U.S. Millennials and iGen: Age,*



# Those Twenties

## An interview with Lawrence Parker on the National Left-Wing Movement

Efraim Carlebach

*On July 21, 2018, Efraim Carlebach interviewed Lawrence Parker about his latest book, Communists and Labour—The National Left-Wing Movement 1925–1929. The book is available on lulu.com. [1] What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

**Efraim Carlebach:** How did you come to write this book?

**Lawrence Parker:** I wrote a book a while ago with a similar theme, a short pamphlet on the beginnings of Maoist organizations—or Marxist-Leninist revolutionary groups—in Britain, including The Leninist, which is still around in the shape of the CPGB/Weekly Worker. I was a member of the CPGB/Weekly Worker a long time ago. Through doing that project I got into history writing. After I’d finished my previous work, Ben Lewis of the CPGB said to me, “Why don’t you look at the 1920s and the CPGB?” They find it very frustrating, because there is very little written about this period. When Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, I began to look around at older left-wing interventions into the Labour Party. I found the National Left-Wing Movement (NLWM), which had only been covered in footnotes or by a few Trotskyist writers in the past—only one writer had produced an essay of any kind of substance on it. I started off with the idea that because we have this kind of left wing—I think upsurge would be the wrong word—becoming more apparent in the Labour Party, it would be interesting to look at past projects that had involved a left wing. However, as the project has gone on, I’ve gone beyond that starting point, because I don’t think 2018 shares many similarities with the 1920s.

**EC:** One of the major differences between the intervention in the Labour Party by the NLWM in the 1920s and that of Corbyn and Momentum today is the existence of the CPGB. Today there is no political party of that kind, nor is there the international context. Could you talk about the founding of the CPGB in 1920?

**LP:** I’ll preface this remark by saying that there’s a grumpy school of thought in the British Trotskyist movement, which says that the CPGB was a foreign importation into British soil. The formation of the Third International, the Comintern, was a major factor in the CPGB forming, and the interventions in the CPGB by Lenin and the Comintern are well known. However, it was the coming together of some native trends in the form of the British Socialist Party (BSP), a group that had always had an orientation to the Labour Party in the past, and the Socialist Labour Party, a section of which did join the early CPGB, but was quite hostile to the Labour Party. Then you had Sylvia Pankhurst’s group and other smaller formations. Although you would characterise them as sects, paying more attention to their own intellectual girding than the movement as a whole, the CPGB was a coming together of a small but important advanced minority of the working class. These were people who were involved in the movement and in the Labour Party. People such as Willie Gallagher, an early CPGB leader, didn’t come out of nowhere; they came out of the Scottish working-class movement, strike movements, anti-war movements and so forth. The coming together of the CPGB was an incredibly important moment in the British workers’ movement. The international dimension pushed these small warring groups together. Getting a sense of collaboration and working together in the midst of differences is an important moment. Such moments are few and far between these days. For my project the most important antecedent organization was the BSP because it was embedded in the Labour Party. When the CPGB narrowly decided to get involved in attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party, communists carried over their Labour Party memberships from the BSP as they became communists. Joe Vaughan, one of the leading characters in my story and Britain’s first communist mayor, had been a BSP member and a Labour Party member for a considerable time.

**EC:** The CPGB combined the BSP, with its orientation towards the Labour Party, and the SLP, which was more anti-Labour Party. In your book, you argue that this produced a “couplet” of opportunism and sectarianism in the early CPGB, which went on to plague the NLWM, but was also the problem it was trying to address. How was that manifesting at that time?

**LP:** Those trends become most apparent, publicly at least, in 1924 with the election of a minority Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald. Even communists who had a clear understanding of the dangers of opportunism—such as Rajani Palme Dutt, the CPGB’s leading intellectual—were pulled into opportunism when that government arrived. Dutt talks about how the struggle for power was here and we don’t want to embarrass the Labour government by forcing our ideas upon it. You find letters from the CPGB saying, “Take this as an earnest desire that we want to help the new Labour government in its endeavours.” That is just rank opportunism. But if you look into CPGB documents quite closely, you’ll also see that this caused leading communists such as Tom Bell—this is repeated a few times in the literature—to look at the way communists reacted to Labour and report, “What you have in our party is a bunch of people who, as soon as they get in a hall full of Labour Party members, completely lose their heads and turn into Labourites.” That creates a reaction within the party. There’s a group that then says, “This is exactly what we warned you about if you work inside the Labour Party. A plague on your house. We’re revolutionaries.” Internally, this all became apparent when the CPGB had a reorganization in 1922. Subsequently, there was a debate in the Comintern, which I cover a bit in the book, between Dutt, other leading communists, and Comintern figures. In that debate, all the CPGB members allude to this division. I think Gallagher says at one point, “Basically we’ve got the BSP and SLP, which have just replicated themselves through the party. We’ve got a group of members who are Labourites and another who think that Labourism is poison.” The tensions from that seem apparent quite early. More generally, the Comintern was extremely dissatisfied with the CPGB in the 1920s. It thought the strength of the British working-class movement should be leading to a bigger, more effective Communist Party. The Comintern generally seems to the left of the CPGB up to about 1928. I think that was an unambiguously good thing. This might be somewhat controversial to

Trotskyists. The Comintern, generally, gave the CPGB quite good advice until it got toxic around the third period of the Comintern.

**EC:** The CPGB was involved in supporting the Labour Party in the 1924 election, when Ramsay MacDonald, a right-wing Labour Party figure, became the first Labour Prime Minister with a minority government. One of the phrases used then, which came from the Comintern, was the “united front.” What were the different understandings of that term?

**LP:** Well, the united front was a recognition by the Comintern that the revolutionary wave after the impact of the Russian Revolution had subsided. Therefore, communists had to form a united front with the broader labour movement and its leaders—it wasn’t just what became “the united front from below”; it was a united front with all the workers’ movement—to organize around certain aims and demands, on which you march separately and strike together. In theory, that meant that all the communist parties and their leaders were to retain a discursive attitude to working with the rest of the labour movement—they were expected to be critical of their block partners. It was not this flatulent idea of broad lefts we have come to understand, where revolutionaries pretend to be reformists and agree with everything the reformists say in the hope that they can get a march or a strike. It was meant to be a unity in diversity: a group of different people retaining their own independence of press, thought, and mind. For limited aims they march separately but strike together. Some CPGB members commented on differences of interpretation. Some people saw the united front as the end of the process: “Once we’re in unity with those people, all you do is work for our limited aim.” The left of the party, at least those who accepted the united front, would have seen it as a way of manipulating Labour and trade union leaders to lead something so that you could undercut them and throw them out. It was just a way of manipulating workers into action. That theory is prevalent on the British left now: all these campaigns are a way of manipulating people on to the streets. There were differences of emphasis and opinion; some had a more wholesome attitude to the united front than others did.

**EC:** You distinguish the 1920s united front, where you would maintain political differences, from the “flatulent idea of broad lefts” today. One of the important phenomena that you look at in the build-up to the founding of the NLWM is the Sunday Worker. You describe the approach of the Sunday Worker to unity in difference in a similar way. It wasn’t a vague big-tentism, but a means to an end, a way of clarifying differences in ideas. How did the Sunday Worker approach unity in difference?

**LP:** The Sunday Worker was founded in March 1925. Contrary to what people may read elsewhere, it was an unambiguously communist paper. If you looked at the Sunday Worker’s presentation, structure, and use of photography, you would know that this was a communist paper. Sometimes people try to pretend that it was a broad-left paper like the Morning Star—a daily newspaper in the UK that is run by one of the fragments of the old Communist Party—which isn’t about clarifying differences, but about big-tentism. It collapses differences to get unity around very banal things, such as, “Do we all hate fascists? Yes!” The Sunday Worker wasn’t about that at all. It was a communist paper with specific aims. However, it had a broad intake from across the labour movement. It wasn’t just the CPGB line. It was a culturally lively paper with an engaged audience of about 80,000 to 100,000. Back then, more people read the paper than just those who bought it, so it was a mass newspaper. It was particularly good, for example, around the 1925 Labour conference, which upheld the decision to exclude communists. The paper had different voices and opinions from in and around the Labour Party. Harry Pollitt, at that time an up-and-coming communist leader, said in the Sunday Worker what a disgrace it had been and what a disgrace the left wing of the Labour Party were for not fighting. Then you had other soft left figures such as George Lansbury complaining about the communists. There was an attempt to build up a picture of what had happened with all the voices there. It was presented as, “The communists are militant and these others are backsliders,” but that intervention was twenty times more effective, because you had a montage of different voices and approaches.

**EC:** The NLWM was founded not long after that. How was it founded and why?

**LP:** I think there was one overriding reason. By late 1925, it was clear that the Labour Party was changing. It was getting more working-class votes and being viewed as a means into government. Figures such as Ramsay MacDonald saw the Labour Party as a means to their own advancement and to the “labour movement”—a rather nebulous idea—exercising power in capitalist Britain. That meant compromise. They didn’t want a group of communist militants in the Labour Party. Even in 1926 or late 1927, out of a Communist Party membership of 5,000, about 1,500 were also members of the Labour Party. You’d had MPs such as Saklatvala who were Labour/Communist MPs. There were lots of local figures all over the country—Vaughan would be an example in Bethnal Green—who were embedded in the Labour Party and spoke for the Labour Party as Labour/Communists. The Labour Party didn’t want this anymore. It was on a bourgeois path to respectability. Therefore, the communists had to organize to defend themselves against expulsion. They couldn’t carry on in this loose organization, where the Communist Party could not control any of its members inside the Labour Party. Also, Zinoviev and the Comintern leadership in the mid-1920s were seriously nonplussed about the CPGB’s opportunist behaviour towards the first Labour government. Zinoviev sent birthday wishes to the Workers’ Weekly on its first anniversary saying, “Well done, but you must take every opportunity to expose the thieving, lying scoundrels that are in the Labour government.” I’ve found fragments suggesting that when CPGB members debated this in Moscow with the Comintern, the Comintern was more keen on the NLWM and a lot of CPGB members didn’t see the point. So the NLWM came together for those two reasons. It started

out—and remained—as a London-centric movement. It began in late 1925 and the first national conference was in 1926. The original idea or prospectus of the NLWM was for it to have a specific socialist programme and to make the Labour Party into a bridge to the CPGB, to make a mass Communist Party.

**EC:** So there’s a foundational tension in the NLWM. On the one hand it is a means to an end—a bridge for workers from the Labour Party to the Communist Party—and on the other hand there was this more nebulous idea that the Labour government had drifted to the right and that it needed to return to “the spirit of Keir Hardie.” What did people mean by “returning Labour to the spirit of Keir Hardie,” the founding figure of the Labour Party?

**LP:** I think it would have meant different things to different people. A Labour Party rank-and-file member who wasn’t a communist in the 1920s may well have agreed with that idea, but they wouldn’t have understood that to mean returning it to a communist idea, because it never was. Some members of the CPGB such as Dutt had a very clear understanding. He wrote an article in 1928, presumably to mess up this kind of understanding of Keir Hardie, saying that Hardie was drawn to the class struggle, but all he could actually find to express that class struggle was the lame language of liberalism. However, for the CPGB’s right in the NLWM it was meant as a softer way of appealing to the Labour Party as a whole. Keir Hardie had never been a revolutionary. He may have had some understanding of Marx or Marxism, but he wasn’t a Marxist, a communist or a proletarian revolutionary. That doesn’t mean that his venture in the period wasn’t a worthy one. That rightist understanding was an attempt to appease Labourism and Labour loyalists. Alongside that idea of returning to Keir Hardie, which I think is a reformist idea judged against Hardie’s politics as a whole, there was this idea held by the Communist Party right, which was expressed in the NLWM by people such as Vaughan, that the aim was to put a Labour Party into power, but the problem before was that we couldn’t control it, so we have to control a Labour government by making Labour’s conference and the Labour rank and file sovereign. Again, when you actually begin looking at the capitalist state and all the lessons we’ve learned about reformism, that is a ludicrous idea, but it is one that would have been appealing to Labour centrists. All these tensions come out pretty rapidly.

**EC:** You mentioned that the NLWM attempted to differentiate a left wing within the Labour Party through a programme. What kind of programme did they put forward? Why was that important?

**LP:** It was important to combat a vague notion of the Labour left at the time, which is sort of prevalent now. To preface this remark, I’m always rather skeptical about programmes. I’m not anti-programme, but sometimes people hoist their personal worth on to them. In the mass context of the Labour Party, I think the NLWM programme was a good thing. The vague, undefined Labour left wouldn’t dream of setting out their demands in a programme, because of diffuse, mishmash politics. Yes, the Labour left would say they are socialists, but they don’t want to be pinned down—as Labour leftists never do—on how you are actually going to achieve socialism. The Labour Party was very different then to what it is now. I don’t think there is any conception in the Labour Party now of achieving socialism. But I will be fair to the Labour left of the 1920s: they were socialists who wanted to achieve an alternative society, but the means by which they did this were lacking. For example, Ellen Wilkinson—an ex-CPGB member, who was the Labour MP for Middlesborough—said that we don’t need programmes; what is important is the spirit of the people who get into government. That nonsense will come to grief within five seconds. The CPGB had a programme to differentiate itself. Britain, at that time in the mid-1920s, was a deferential, militaristic, monarchist society—not totally, but the main public discourse was in that direction. So the NLWM’s programme was anti-militarist: it advocated rights for soldiers, sailors, policemen, and airmen. Britain was a deeply imperialist country at that point and the programme was clearly for the idea of self-determination. It was also anti-monarchist and for the abolition of the House of Lords, although interestingly the Labour Party had been in favour of that also. Then there were other ideas we are probably more familiar with about friendship with the Soviet Union and economic demands about nationalisation without compensation. The NLWM programme posed very starkly to the Labour left a point of difference. I think it was a worthy enterprise.

**EC:** The ratified decision at the 1925 Labour conference in Liverpool to exclude communists from the party led to a process of some local branches disaffiliating from the Labour Party. By 1928, it is increasingly difficult for communists to be in the Labour Party. There is a slight change in the way CPGB intellectuals approach the NLWM and its attempt to work in the Labour Party. You have called this the “delicate dialectic.” What does that mean?

**LP:** Branches that refused to expel their communists were disaffiliated—mostly in London, but also in big cities where the CPGB was strong such as Cardiff, Manchester and Birmingham. But it wrecked the NLWM—an organization set up to relate to Labour Party members. The work of the NLWM became something slightly different: maintaining a group of disaffiliated parties. There were financial difficulties and people drifting away. The CPGB was not very interested in disaffiliated parties. That creates many difficulties. In 1928, the CPGB and the Comintern look at this and say, “This can’t go on. What do we do now? The situation has changed. We’ve been booted out. Do we carry on voting Labour, supporting Labour’s local candidates?” The idea is no: the disaffiliated parties have to stand against the official “scab” parties. To begin with at least, the disaffiliated parties were often bigger than the official organizations. But also the CPGB changes its line in early 1928. Initially it wanted to carry on supporting the idea of a Labour government into power, as we were doing before and to utilise all our footholds within the Labour Party. The Comintern intervenes and the line changes to something along the lines of, “The Labour Party is almost a third capitalist party.” That is what I am getting at with the phrase “delicate dialectic,” because that was not a popular line among Labour Party members. It actually meant that already there had been a shift in dynamic in the NLWM. I am having to extrapolate this from inferences, but in the early days the NLWM would have been fundamentally composed

of communists, close supporters of communists and a broader group of Labour Party members who would have thought, “We don’t want to get rid of the communists. They are really good fighters for the class.” This changes as time goes on—the CPGB knew that it had changed—to the NLWM being composed of the CPGB and its closest supporters inside the Labour Party, so there is already a narrowing. The problem with the “delicate dialectic” is that if you then go to that narrower formation and say, “The Labour Party is nearly a third capitalist party and we have to stand against the official Labour candidates,” that makes things incredibly difficult. I don’t actually see what else they could have done, really, in the circumstances. I think it says, “This a desperate set of circumstances; what the hell do we do? We’ve been defeated”—which is what this is coming to terms with.

**EC:** In 1928–29, the CPGB still wants to work in the Labour Party, but the NLWM is in a deep crisis. You describe a shift from the NLWM’s socialist programme to engaging in day-to-day struggles, in which CPGB members should differentiate themselves as the most active, rather than through a programme. Why did this shift come about and what are some of the outcomes of it?

**LP:** First of all, Dutt remarked that he thought that the NLWM programme was a centrist programme, meaning something that is indeterminate between revolution and reform. The left of the CPGB was being encouraged by the Comintern. Although 1928 wasn’t the beginning of the third period—I think the CPGB at least seemed to be reasonably sane in that period—we are drifting towards the third period. There was a sense that the left of the party—figures such as Dutt, Harry Pollitt, J. T. Murphy, Idris Cox, and others drawn towards the left at this point—didn’t like anything about the NLWM in this era. They didn’t like it because it didn’t really fit with the shift to the left that was going on in communist politics. The irony of their position is that they actually came up with some very rational criticisms of the NLWM. The NLWM was a car crash, so it was an easy target. The programme became identified with the whole failure of the movement. They were criticizing the idea of having a left-wing programme to which we hold a Labour government to. This had obviously been used by the CPGB’s right and was an idea associated with the NLWM. The left of the party had a real hold on the rank and file at this point, but it didn’t take over the leadership until later in 1929. I think that the NLWM was completely undermined by a process of association. The economic thing is really interesting. When the CPGB began to supposedly shift to the left, the first thing it did was undermine the principled programme that it had gone to the Labour left with. They argue at the conference when the NLWM was spiked that, “The workers support our local and immediate demands.” So you have this so-called leftism going on, which just collapses straight into rightism. I can see the seeds there of what has blossomed today: revolutionary groups with incredibly revolutionary rhetoric at times, but, actually, when push comes to shove, they want to just coagulate around some kind of immediate strike or demo. It’s the same old thing: a sad process.

**EC:** It seems that in the short trajectory of the NLWM the attempt to pose a relationship between means and ends was lost. The idea of using the programme as a means to clarifying and articulating the left wing within the Labour Party, in order to bridge it towards the CPGB and make the CPGB a mass party was lost by 1929. On both the left and right of the CPGB, the means have become the ends.

**LP:** It’s a form of political collapse—just a wipeout. I would add one rider to that. I agree with you, but there is something interesting about the CPGB’s leadership and the Comintern in early 1929 that is worth emphasising. Many Trotskyists will say that the NLWM collapsed because of the third period. I suspect it would have collapsed in the end due to the third period, but actually in 1929 the NLWM had already collapsed anyway because of disaffiliation and the reasons I have already set out. However, both the CPGB leadership and the Comintern wanted the NLWM to continue. Now, in terms of relating to members in the Labour Party, I don’t know what cadre were going to carry that out, because they had all just been removed. The idea of a bridge is gone, but they were very keen on the NLWM being a means to recruit to the CPGB. But they were going to go in there on the basis of the most immediate kind of politics. So you would go in, campaign around a load of immediate demands and the communists would be the best fighters for those immediate demands—which I actually believe would be true in that circumstance. But then on what basis do you make them communists? On the basis of strikes and activism? I think it’s a banal perspective.

**EC:** As you mentioned, the immediate horizon for the Comintern and the CPGB is the supposedly left-wing turn to the third period, but it seems that what you are describing, in terms of CPGB members still engaging with the Labour Party by fighting on immediate demands, actually points towards the popular front of the later 1930s, which liquidated revolutionary politics into the Labour Party through this emphasis on the day-to-day struggle. It seems that the earlier tensions in the 1920s foreshadows the problems of the popular front.

**LP:** Everything the CPGB did in the Labour Party in the 1930s represents the worst parts of what they did in the 1920s. There was a debate in the CPGB in the 1920s about whether you should hide your communism. The CPGB came to the conclusion that you don’t hide that you are communists. It would have been absurd for Joe Vaughan or Harry Pollitt to hide as communists, because as communists they were all well-known individuals embedded in the party. There was some tension in the 1920s over this. Some people had tried to hide a bit, but I think some of that could have been tactical, if they were being disaffiliated and so forth. But in the 1930s it was a straightforward clandestine operation. They were secret men and women. They pretended they were something else and then they yanked themselves out and turned themselves into Stalinist clones in 1939/40, which is a separate story. When the CPGB entered the Labour Party in the 1930s, it just adapted itself. It actually wrote, “We don’t want to write big, long programmes about what we want to do. What is important is that we must work on the immediate demands of workers and shopkeepers.” It was all the bad ideas of the 1920s amplified. We have talked about right-wing opportunism but there was also a strand within the CPGB in the 1920s and the